

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
<small>Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Washington Headquarters Service, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington, DC 20503.</small>					
PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 1-05-2012		2. REPORT TYPE Master of Military Studies Research Paper		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) September 2011 - April 2012	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A	
6. AUTHOR(S) Major Christopher Reynolds				5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A	
				5e. TASK NUMBER N/A	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) N/A	
				11. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER N/A	
12. DISTRIBUTION AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES N/A					
14. ABSTRACT This paper will explain the origins of the Combined Action Program, what the combined actions platoons were, why they were effective, and how the experiences of the combined action platoons are relevant to future counterinsurgencies.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Combined Action Platoons COIN					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Marine Corps University / Command and Staff College
a. REPORT Unclass	b. ABSTRACT Unclass	c. THIS PAGE Unclass			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code) (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETING SF 298

1. REPORT DATE. Full publication date, including day, month, if available. Must cite at least the year and be Year 2000 compliant, e.g., 30-06-1998; xx-08-1998; xx-xx-1998.

2. REPORT TYPE. State the type of report, such as final, technical, interim, memorandum, master's thesis, progress, quarterly, research, special, group study, etc.

3. DATES COVERED. Indicate the time during which the work was performed and the report was written, e.g., Jun 1997 - Jun 1998; 1-10 Jun 1996; May - Nov 1998; Nov 1998.

4. TITLE. Enter title and subtitle with volume number and part number, if applicable. On classified documents, enter the title classification in parentheses.

5a. CONTRACT NUMBER. Enter all contract numbers as they appear in the report, e.g. F33615-86-C-5169.

5b. GRANT NUMBER. Enter all grant numbers as they appear in the report, e.g. 1F665702D1257.

5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER. Enter all program element numbers as they appear in the report, e.g. AFOSR-82-1234.

5d. PROJECT NUMBER. Enter all project numbers as they appear in the report, e.g. 1F665702D1257; ILIR.

5e. TASK NUMBER. Enter all task numbers as they appear in the report, e.g. 05; RF0330201; T4112.

5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER. Enter all work unit numbers as they appear in the report, e.g. 001; AFAPL30480105.

6. AUTHOR(S). Enter name(s) of person(s) responsible for writing the report, performing the research, or credited with the content of the report. The form of entry is the last name, first name, middle initial, and additional qualifiers separated by commas, e.g. Smith, Richard, Jr.

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES). Self-explanatory.

8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER. Enter all unique alphanumeric report numbers assigned by the performing organization, e.g. BRL-1234; AFWL-TR-85-4017-Vol-21-PT-2.

9. SPONSORING/MONITORS AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES). Enter the name and address of the organization(s) financially responsible for and monitoring the work.

10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S). Enter, if available, e.g. BRL, ARDEC, NADC.

11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S). Enter report number as assigned by the sponsoring/ monitoring agency, if available, e.g. BRL-TR-829; -215.

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT. Use agency-mandated availability statements to indicate the public availability or distribution limitations of the report. If additional limitations/restrictions or special markings are indicated, follow agency authorization procedures, e.g. RD/FRD, PROPIN, ITAR, etc. Include copyright information.

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES. Enter information not included elsewhere such as: prepared in cooperation with; translation of; report supersedes; old edition number, etc.

14. ABSTRACT. A brief (approximately 200 words) factual summary of the most significant information.

15. SUBJECT TERMS. Key words or phrases identifying major concepts in the report.

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION. Enter security classification in accordance with security classification regulations, e.g. U, C, S, etc. If this form contains classified information, stamp classification level on the top and bottom of this page.

17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT. This block must be completed to assign a distribution limitation to the abstract. Enter UU (Unclassified Unlimited) or SAR (Same as Report). An entry in this block is necessary if the abstract is to be limited.

United States Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
2076 South Street
Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE: Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

AUTHOR: Major Christopher M. Reynolds, USMC

AY 11-12

Mentor and Oral Defense Committee

Member: Mark Jacobsen

Approved: Mark Jacobsen

Date: 27 April 2012

Oral Defense Committee Member:

Dr. Paul D. Gier

Approved: [Signature]

Date: 27 April 2012

Executive Summary

Title: Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam

Author: Major Christopher M. Reynolds, USMC

Thesis: This paper will explain the origins of the Combined Action Program, what the combined actions platoons were, why they were effective, and how the experiences of the combined action platoons are relevant to future counterinsurgencies.

Discussion: In Vietnam, the simple combination of professional Marines with indigenous security forces created a synergy that was much greater than the sum of its parts. The discipline, proficiency, and professionalism of the US Marines improved the quality and professionalism of the local security forces. The local security forces provided the Marines with the local expertise, and credibility that they would never have been able to obtain without them. Together Combined Action Platoons were an effective counterinsurgency weapon.

Conclusion: Vietnam was a unique situation, however there are lessons that can be applied to future counterinsurgencies. Indigenous security forces provide local knowledge and connect to the population. Combining efforts can benefit all and be a combat multiplier when competing for the allegiance and loyalty of local populations.

DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENT AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

QUOTATION FROM, ABSTRACTION FROM, OR REPRODUCTION OF ALL OR ANY PART OF THIS DOCUMENT IS PERMITTED PROVIDED PROPER ACKNOWLEDGEMENT IS MADE.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5
Background.....	5
Origins of the CAP.....	8
How the CAPs were effective.....	17
Problems with the CAP.....	20
Relevancy to future counterinsurgencies.....	21
Conclusion.....	23
Endnotes.....	25
Bibliography.....	29

INTRODUCTION

In the I Corp Tactical Zone Vietnam, during the violent years between 1965 and 1971, the Marine combined action platoons (CAP) fought a compassionate counterinsurgency in sharp contrast to the “search & destroy” mentality of the era. The combined action program had a humble beginning in August 1965¹ with initial success that spawned rapid expansion of the program from 1966 to 1967² and consistent presence until the First Marine Division returned home from Vietnam in 1971.³ **This paper will explain the origins of the Combined Action Program, what the combined actions platoons were, why they were effective, and how the experiences of the combined action platoons are relevant to future counterinsurgencies.**

BACKGROUND

Michael Peterson begins his book “*The Combined Action Platoons*”, by discussing the differences between partisan guerrilla warfare and insurgent guerrilla warfare. In the partisan guerrilla model, guerrilla fighters are an extension of, and dependant upon, regular forces. In the insurgent guerrilla warfare model, guerrilla fighters are a part of a political movement internal to a host nation and can be independent of support from an external nation.⁴ The distinction between the two models is why the combined action platoons were uniquely Marine and why their establishment did not seem to fit into the American strategy in Vietnam.

In 1965, the U.S. Army counterinsurgency doctrine was based on the partisan guerrilla warfare model.⁵ It was derived from experiences in the Greek Civil War and in

the Korean Conflict. Based on this doctrine; “What was needed to defeat or otherwise contain the partisan threat was to cut the lines of supply and communications between the partisans and their host country, combined with attrition tactics by conventional forces.”⁶ This U.S. Army counterinsurgency doctrine produced the infamous “Search & Destroy Operations” in Vietnam. In 1962, the U.S. Marine Corps adopted much of this same doctrine in the Fleet Marine Forces Manual 8-2, *Operations Against Guerrilla Forces* (FMFM 8-2). However, prior to 1962, the U.S. Marine counterinsurgency doctrine was based on experiences in the Banana wars and the 1940 publication of the *Small Wars Manual*. This doctrine focused on the insurgent guerrilla warfare model.⁷ In sharp contrast to “attrition tactics by conventional forces”⁸ the *Small Wars Manual* of 1940 had more of a Sun Tzu type approach and stated; “A Force Commander who gains his objective in a small war without firing a shot has attained far greater success than the one who resorted to the use of arms.”⁹ The *Small Wars Manual* of 1940 also focused on population over terrain. “The end aim is social, economic, and political development of the people subsequent to the military defeat of the enemy insurgent. In small wars, tolerance, sympathy, and kindness should be the keynote of our relationship with the mass of the population.”¹⁰ Although the U.S. Marine Corps official doctrine had changed in 1962 with the adaptation of FMFM 8-2, in 1965 there was still some resident knowledge within the U.S. Marine Corps of the doctrine contained in the *Small Wars Manual* and the experiences between 1915 and 1935.

In Vietnam 1965, there were conflicting ideas between the U.S. Army and the U.S. Marine Corps about how the conflict should be conducted. U.S. Army General William Westmoreland was the senior commander in Vietnam in 1965 as the

Commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). He “favored conventional U.S. military doctrines of massive application of firepower, large mobile formations, and search and destroy operations.”¹¹ Andrew Krepinevich described General Westmoreland’s beliefs as “focused on consolidation of terrain, not population. In any event, the purpose of search and destroy was not to occupy territory but to engage in battle.”¹²

U.S. Marine Lieutenant General Victor Krulak in 1965 was the Commanding General of Fleet Marine Forces Pacific (CG FMFPac). Prior to commanding FMFPac, Lieutenant General Krulak served the Joint Chiefs of Staff as the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency Activities. He was intimately familiar with the concepts in the 1940 *Small Wars Manual* and his opinion on how the Vietnam War should be fought directly opposed that of General Westmoreland’s. Lieutenant General Krulak believed that the appropriate strategy focused on the Vietnamese population living in the hamlets and villages. Lieutenant General Krulak argued, “It is our conviction that if we can destroy the guerrilla fabric among the people, we will automatically deny the larger units the food and the intelligence and the taxes, and the other support that they need. At the same time, if the big units want to sortie out of the mountains and come down here where they can be cut up by our supporting arms, the Marines are glad to take them on, but the real war is among the people and not among the mountains.”¹³ His opinion reflected the former U.S. Marine counterinsurgency doctrine contained in the 1940 *Small Wars Manual* and addressed the insurgent guerrilla warfare model.

Naturally, General Westmoreland’s opinion prevailed.¹⁴ However, I Corps Tactical Zone (consisted of the five most northern provinces of Vietnam) was the responsibility of

the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) commanded by Major General Lewis W. Walt. III MAF was subordinate to MACV but within its area of responsibility “as a senior regional commander, General Walt had a mission-type order which by custom afforded him considerable leeway in execution”.¹⁵ This leeway afforded to a senior regional commander allowed for the experiment and ultimate establishment of the combined action program.

In 1965 the U.S. Marines pushed out of their established beachheads in Da Nang and Phu Bai¹⁶. When the Marines pushed inland and cleared hamlets of Viet Cong, the Viet Cong dispersed, and then flowed back into previously cleared areas once the Marines moved on.¹⁷ Often an ARVN unit followed the U.S. Marines, but instead of maintaining security, they looted, taxed, and abused the local population, then left.¹⁸ Lieutenant General Krulak, the CG FMFPac, and Major General Walt the CG III MAF, recognized this problem, and as a solution they established Tactical Areas of Responsibility (TAOR). In a TAOR the Marine unit commander shared responsibility for his assigned area and the population in that assigned area with the local ARVN commander.¹⁹ This move was one of the first to take the focus of effort away from cutting the Viet Cong off from external resources and forced the U.S. Marine commander to coordinate and work with the local ARVN commander.

ORIGINS OF THE CAP

The original idea for what developed into the combined action program came from Captain John J. Mullen, the Civil Affairs Officer with Third Battalion, Fourth Marines.²⁰ There were several hamlets to the east and west of the Phu Bai airstrip that were ideal locations for the Viet Cong to use as mortar firing positions or staging areas

for attacks on the air strip. Captain Mullen's idea was to combine a small number of US Marines with a larger number of local indigenous forces to provide the necessary security in the hamlets.²¹

The Regional Forces and Popular Forces were local militias. The Provincial Chiefs directed the Regional Forces, and the District Chiefs directed the Popular Forces.²² Lieutenant General Krulak described the Regional and Popular Forces as "recruited from and served in their own hamlet and as soldiers, they were pitiable. Poorly equipped, poorly trained, poorly led, and given only half the pay of the Vietnamese Army."²³ People joined the local militia to defend their families and their homes. The fact that they stayed relatively local (at least that was the concept) to their homes and answered to local chiefs made it easy for the national government to under fund them, but it also made them a valuable asset in counterinsurgency warfare.

Combining these ill-trained forces with well-disciplined Marines created a cohesive force that was greater than the sum of its parts.²⁴ The U.S. Marines had firepower, reaction forces, medical support, helicopters, training, and equipment. The local militia forces knew the local rice paddies, village roads systems, local families and in many cases knew, and/or were related to, the local Viet Cong insurgents. The local militias were defending their homes and families with extensive local knowledge, little combat support and no combat enablers. The U.S. Marines were fighting a counterinsurgency in a foreign land with little local knowledge. Combining U.S. Marines with local militias allowed both to benefit from the other's strength.

On 1 August 1965, the first of what was then called "joint action company (JAC)" was born.²⁵ First Lieutenant Paul Ek was assigned to lead the first JAC. First Lieutenant

Ek selected volunteers from the various infantry line companies in Third Battalion, Fourth Marines. He conducted a short period of initial training with the selected U.S. Marines and integrated them into the existing Popular Force platoons from the local hamlets. The first week together they conducted day patrols into the hamlets to get acquainted, then they progressed to day and night patrols.²⁶ Their presence in the hamlets increased until the platoons occupied permanent positions either on the edge of, or inside the hamlets.

At first the Viet Cong avoided the new combined platoons. “In fact, the first significant action between a joint action platoon and the Viet Cong did not occur until 29 November, when a combined squad ambushed a platoon of Viet Cong, killing four—including the unit commander, and capturing one.”²⁷ The mere presence of U.S. Marines living and patrolling with local security forces contradicted Viet Cong propaganda. The proficiency and professionalism of the Popular Forces in the JAC soared. “No longer did they feel alone.”²⁸ The Popular Force soldiers had the leadership of a seasoned U.S. Marine Sergeant, all the combat enablers of the U.S. Marines, and now interpersonal relationships with Marines that they knew would not let them down. The Popular Force soldiers’ morale increased, they emulated the U.S. Marines on patrol, and local security improved.²⁹

Third Battalion, Fourth Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William W. Taylor, began the combined action experiment, and U.S. Marine battalions across I Corps Tactical Zone followed with their own versions of the same concept. In November 1965 Major General Walt (CG IIIMAF) requested feedback from his subordinate commands, and the outcome was a clear desire from the separate battalions for more combined

operations with the Regional and Popular Forces. Major General Walt took this information to ARVN Commanding Officer for the I Corps Tactical Zone, Major General Nguyen Chanh Thi, who then committed eight Popular Force Platoons to the defense of the Da Nang U.S. air base.³⁰

By November 1965 it was clear that the combined action concept had potential and the Joint Action Company was renamed Combined Action Company (CAC),³¹ with the Joint Action Platoons referred to as Combined Action Platoons (CAP). The Combined Action Company had the full support of both the U.S. Marine senior leadership and the ARVN leadership. On 28 January, 1965 Major General Thi issued a memorandum to his Vietnamese forces explaining, and supporting, the combined action concept. Major General Thi highlighted the benefits of the concept from the Vietnamese point of view. He mentioned the increased morale and fighting spirit of the Combined Popular Force platoons, and also wrote “the mistakes by allied troops which have proved harmful to the people have been decreased.”³² Shortly after, in February 1966, Major General Walt (CG III MAF) made the Combined Action Program official.³³

In 1966 Combined Action Companies were established throughout I Corps Tactical Zone. Volunteers were selected from line companies, trained at a brief CAP school, and partnered with local militia forces. They remained under the operational control of their parent battalion and depended upon their parent battalion for support. The U.S. Marine infantry battalions conducted the American search and destroy strategy with conventional forces, and relied on the CAPs to secure their rear areas. Lieutenant Colonel William Corson, who later commanded the Combined Action Program, wrote in his 1968

book *The Betrayal*; “By the end of January 1967 the combined-action units were an effective auxiliary rear-area defense force.”³⁴

THE CAP

The CAP was the link between the U.S. Marines and the Vietnamese population in the local villages and hamlets. The CAP increased the capabilities of the local militia forces. The CAP gained an accepted presence from which they could compete with the Viet Cong for the loyalty and allegiance of the local population. The CAP lived among the population in the local village and denied access to the Viet Cong. The CAP conducted security patrols, engaged in civil-military operations, trained the local forces, and developed a relationship with the local population. In the counterinsurgency guerrilla warfare model, the population is the focus of effort. The CAP focused on the local population. The CAP was also a method of training local forces so that eventually the U.S. Marines could turn over security to them responsibly.

In concept, the CAP and the line infantry battalion complemented each other. The CAPs secured villages allowing the line infantry to clear the surrounding areas of organized enemy threats.³⁵ “In the course of operations, line units would benefit from intelligence and the knowledge of local conditions provided by the CAP platoons, while those platoon relied on line units for fire support and reaction forces”.³⁶ There was also a training piece to the CAP. The CAPs were tasked to train the local Popular or Regional Forces so that they could eventually assume responsibility for the security of their local areas.³⁷

Marine members of the CAP volunteered from line companies and had at least six months of Vietnam experience. Candidates were required to have above an average

general classification test score, a clean record, and the ability to work with indigenous forces.³⁸ When the requirement for CAP Marines quickly escalated, the standards for CAP Marines was temporarily lowered.³⁹ Naturally, during the rapid expansion of the program in 1966 and 1967 not all CAP Marines were volunteers, not all were infantry Marines, and some were assigned to a CAP without any Vietnam experience. By 1970 the Combined Action Groups (CAG) were formed and screened applicants with a twenty to twenty-five percent rejection rate.⁴⁰ All CAP Marines went through a two week CAP school located in Da Nang to familiarize them with the nuances of working with Vietnamese forces and living among the indigenous population. This training “included refresher training in basic infantry weapons; small-unit tactics; first aid; map and compass reading; war dog use; procedures for requesting and controlling artillery fire; air strikes; medical evacuation; Vietnamese language, history, and culture; Vietnamese politics; history and organization of the PFs; and Viet Cong organization, weapons, and tactics.”⁴¹ The CAP school’s busy schedule also included nighttime combined patrols with Popular Force soldiers.

Once formed, the U.S. Marine component of the CAP was combined with the either Regional Forces component or Popular Forces component. The math for combining the two forces was simple. The U.S. Marine squad had one sergeant squad leader and one corpsman, plus three fire teams of four Marines each. The Vietnamese component was a standing Popular Force platoon or a Regional Force platoon. Both had a platoon headquarters section of one Platoon Leader (2nd Lieutenant) and four soldiers and three squads of eleven soldiers each. To combine them, the U.S. Marine squad leader and the U.S. Navy Corpsman integrated into the platoon headquarters, and each U.S. Marine

fire team augmented a different squad. The end product was a platoon with both a Vietnamese Platoon Leader, and a U.S. Marine sergeant, a U.S. Navy Corpsman, four Vietnamese soldiers in the headquarters, and three squads comprised of eleven Vietnamese soldiers and four U.S. Marines each. This combination gave the Vietnamese Platoon Leader the solid leadership example and counsel of the Marine sergeant, plus each squad had the leadership example of the U.S. Marine fire team leader and the combat effectiveness associated with a Marine Corps fire team.

Command and control was more complicated. Both sides recognized the benefits to shared responsibility but also the need for unity of command. In First Lieutenant Ek's JAC, (the first CAP in Vietnam) the U.S. Marine Squad Leader was the Platoon Leader, and his Vietnamese counterpart was his Assistant Platoon Leader.⁴² In later CAPs this relationship developed to a more evenly shared command relationship. The Vietnamese Platoon Leader commanded the Vietnamese soldiers, and the U.S. Marine Squad Leader commanded the U.S. Marines. By October 1967 a III MAF Memorandum explained the command relationship as: "Command functions are dual; the Marine Rifle Squad commanded by the Squad Leader; under military command of the Combined Action Company Commander; the PF Platoon leader exercises military command over his platoon, under command of the Vietnamese Sub-Sector (District) Commander. Operational control of the Combined Action Platoon is exercised by the Marine infantry battalion commander in whose TAOR the CAP is located, through bi-lateral agreement between USMC and GVN commanders."⁴³ Therefore, operational control of the CAP belonged to the parent infantry battalion who owned the TAOR, however, the Vietnamese component still answered to their traditional local chiefs.

Assigning both forces the exact same mission, facilitated unity of effort, and eased the complicated command relationship. III MAF Force Order 3121.4B dated 22 June 1968 listed the mission of the CAP: “Both the Popular Force and the US Marine elements of the Combined Action Platoon have the following missions: 1. Destroy the VC infrastructure within the village or hamlet area of responsibility. 2. Provide public security and help maintain law and order. 3. Protect the friendly political infrastructure. 4. Protect bases and lines of communication within the village and hamlet in which they are located by conducting day and night patrols and ambushes in the assigned area. 5. Contribute to combined operations with RF, ARVN, FWMAF, and other PF units in their area. 6. Participate in civic action and conduct psychological operations against the Viet Cong. 7. The US Marine element has the additional mission of providing military training to the PF soldiers in order to prepare them to effectively perform the mission cited above when the Marine element is relocated to another area.”⁴⁴

This mission explains exactly what the CAP was at the time. By 1968 the inclusion of protecting friendly political infrastructure, conducting psychological operations, and contributing to other combined operations, described the CAP as more than simply an economy of force measure for rear area security. The CAP was used as a counterinsurgency tactic. The training provision directed at the U.S. Marine element clarified that the Popular Forces would someday inherit the sole responsibility of their area and that the U.S. Marine component was temporary.

Originally the parent infantry battalion was responsibly for all coordination and associated support to the CAPs in their TAOR. Force Order 3121.4A in July 1967 established Combined Action Companies (CAC, later CACO) and Combined Action

Groups (CAG).⁴⁵ These were administrative formations established to support the CAPs. The infantry battalion that owed the TAOR retained operational control of the CAP in their TAOR, however the CAGs and CACOs provided a chain of command as well as administrative and logistical support. The CACOs were collocated with district headquarters and supported the CAPs in their district. Each CAP had a tactical area of coordination (TAOC) surrounding the village that they were responsible for. The Combined Action Companies facilitated coordination for “fire support, reactionary forces, medevac procedures, patrol activities, ambushes, etc., and combined operations involving CAPs in the district.”⁴⁶ The CAGs provided administrative and logistical support to the CACOs. Each CAG had between eight to ten CACOs. By 1970 there were four Combined Action Groups.⁴⁷

In 1968, during the Tet Offensive, several CAPs were overrun, and as a result, many CAPs became mobile CAPs.⁴⁸ The essence of the CAP was the village in which it protected, therefore the compound that housed the CAP was either in the village or on the edge of the village. The compound was the command center for the CAP, a place where its members lived, defended, and conducted engagements with the population. The compound was also a structure that the enemy could reconnoiter, survey, and plan a deliberate attack on.⁴⁹ The Viet Cong guerrilla fighter used mobility for security. He was safe from attack as long as he could keep his location a secret from his enemy. The mobile CAPs used this same concept for their security from the Viet Cong guerrilla; they stayed on the move so that the Viet Cong could not identify their location in order to plan an attack.

HOW THE CAPs WERE EFFECTIVE

The Combined Action Program was effective because it attacked the insurgent guerrilla's center of gravity. The Viet Cong, required the Vietnamese population to feed him, shelter him, provide intelligence for him, and to replace him when he was killed, wounded, or captured. The CAP made it a contest for the loyalty and support of the local population. The effectiveness of a CAP was largely dependant upon the capability and interpersonal skills of the individual Marines in that CAP. The CAP relied on personal interaction between the CAP members, the local leaders, and the local civilians.

The CAP countered Viet Cong propaganda with their persistent actions. Lieutenant Colonel Corson wrote "the CAPs have been able to confound one of the most important Viet Cong propaganda ploys simply by their ability to remain in the hamlet."⁵⁰ The CAP showed commitment and compassion through their enduring presence and compassionate interaction. One factor against the Americans was the Vietnamese's unfavorable perception from the French imperialists. The CAPs were able to make their own impressions upon the population through their actions.

The small size of the CAP facilitated its success, while also added to its risk. The CAP was relatively unobtrusive to the local hamlet, but significantly impacted security.⁵¹ The small number also facilitated the Marines to build personal relationships with the locals without disturbing the social or political structure of the hamlet. The disadvantage was of course the risk of being overwhelmed by a larger force. Positive relationships with the locals could ensure that the CAP would be warned before an impending attack.

The CAPs empowered the local government. Although operational control of the CAP belonged to the parent infantry battalion commander, the popular forces answered

to the local chief. Anything that increased the capability of the local forces, in turn, increased the capability of the local Chief. The role of the U.S. Marine squad was not to dictate over the local government or the local security forces but to empower them. In III MAF Force Order 3121.4B it states; “The role of the Marines in the CAP is that of an advisor and assistant to the Popular Force soldier”⁵² This requirement to support the local population resonates, and when the CAP Marines ventured into harm’s way to demonstrate that support, a powerful message was sent to the local population.

First Lieutenant Ek attempted to use “assistance rather than terror to win the peoples loyalty.”⁵³ He focused on relationships so the Marines would not be viewed as occupiers, but as members and protectors of the village.⁵⁴ “The District Chief regarded Lt Ek as his equal; Lt Ek treated him as his superior. The four village Chiefs regarded Lt Ek as their superior; Lt Ek treated them as his equal.”⁵⁵

The firepower of the Marine squad and the professionalism of the CAP Marines in that squad commanded respect from the local peasants. The discipline, proficiency, and integrity of the CAP Marines provided credibility to local security forces.⁵⁶ The local forces did not like patrolling at night and that is often when the Viet Cong would enter the hamlets. Combined with U.S. Marines, they had sufficient combat power to patrol throughout the night and deny the hamlet to the Viet Cong.⁵⁷

The CAPs were most effective at denying sanctuary to Viet Cong. The Viet Cong depended on their ability to move and survive in small numbers to avoid detection and annihilation by the American conventional forces. The Viet Cong used small villages for sustenance, intelligence, recruitment, and shelter. The Viet Cong gained support in these villages through propaganda, intimidation, and force. Once a village had a CAP, the local

population had the means to resist and an example to rebut the propaganda. The CAPs competed for the support of the local population by protecting their homes and families, sharing experiences with them, improving their living condition through civil military operations, and empowering their local leaders and local security forces.

The actual success of the Combined Action Program is difficult to quantify. After all it did not win the war, and was in fact a relatively small effort in the war. The Hamlet Evaluation System measured pacification. According to the Hamlet Evaluation System “CAP villages achieved high degrees of pacification much more rapidly than villages without CAP Marines. ...PFs belonging to CAP platoons enjoyed lower desertion rates and higher kill ratios and generated better intelligence than those working without CAP supervision.”⁵⁸ In 1967 the Hamlet Evaluation System rated the CAP protected villages an average of 2.95 out of a possible 5.0. The average non-CAP protected village in I Corps Tactical Zone only rated a 1.6, it further stated “there was a direct correlation between the time a CAP stayed in a village and the degree of security achieved, with CAP protected villages progressing twice as fast as those occupied with PF alone.”⁵⁹ Despite high marks from the Hamlet Evaluation System, success is still questionable. “The authors of the Pentagon Papers charged that the Marine strategy was judged successful, at least by the Marines, long before it had even had a real test.”⁶⁰

PROBLEMS WITH THE CAPS

The Combined Action Program was not without its share of problems. The biggest deficiency was the lack of USMC Vietnamese language skills and knowledge of Vietnamese culture. The CAP school briefly touched on Vietnamese language and culture, but it was woefully inadequate for the mission. Vietnamese is a difficult language for westerners to learn, and CAPs were handicapped in their population centric mission by not having the skills to effectively communicate with the population. “CAPs with one Marine who could communicate in Vietnamese were considered fortunate; and in others the Marines and PFs developed hand and arm signals to communicate.”⁶¹ Culturally, there were considerable differences between the Vietnamese culture and the western culture that the US Marines grew up in. Theft was a common source of confrontation within the CAPs. The Vietnamese Forces did not have same respect for personal property as the Marines. Often the Vietnamese Forces would “borrow” gear belonging to their Marine comrades without asking permission. On the other side, some Marines supplemented their C-rations with Vietnamese rice or hot chow intended for the Vietnamese Forces. There are many more examples of clashes between the two different cultures, all of which could have been prevented, or mitigated if the Marines had better communication ability with their counterparts.⁶²

The rapid expansion of the Combined Action Program created problems. When the program was rapidly expanding the need to fill CAPs with Marines led to commanders sending unqualified Marines to the CAPs. The requirement for a Marine to have six months of Vietnam experience was often ignored. The individual tour of duty in

Vietnam was only one year, so a Marine who fit that qualification would have to be replaced on a CAP after only six months.

The strategic problem with the CAPs and the population centric approach to counter insurgency, was that it took time. Results were difficult to measure, and there was a limited time in Vietnam to achieve victory.⁶³

Even at the height of the Combined Action Program, in 1969 there were only 114 CAPs⁶⁴. This relatively small number suggests that the Combined Action Program was not the main effort. The vast preponderance of combat power was dedicated to the more conventional US Army strategy of search and destroy.

RELEVANCY TO FUTURE CONFLICTS

In Vietnam the Combined Action Program was effective, but ultimately did not win the war. It was effective at the tactical level in hamlets where CAPs were employed. The Combined Action Program was never able to turn its tactical successes into strategic victory. It may have been because the political will of the U.S. did not allow the Combined Action Program enough time to have sufficient strategic impact, or it may be because there were not enough troops committed to the program. At the height of the conflict out of the 79,000 Marines in I Corps Tactical Zone, only 2,500 were committed to the Combined Action Program. For future counterinsurgencies, both of these realities need to be addressed if the Combined Action Concept is to be applied effectively.

Vietnam was a unique situation, it was a cold war battleground with animosity held over from the French. What was not unique however, and what is applicable for the future, was how the Viet Cong could hide, recruit, and exploit the populations in the local villages. Where combined units were employed, the Viet Cong was denied free access to

the population. In other parts of the World there are guerrilla insurgencies where American counterinsurgents can not tell the insurgents from the locals, and the insurgents are able to flourish among the masses. In those instances a version of the Combined Action Program can be useful in quelling a guerrilla insurgency.

The Combined Action concept is effective at combating guerrilla insurgents because it provides an alternative to the guerrilla insurgent that the population can relate to and trust. The trust between a local CAP and the local population is built on persistent actions that can have a much more powerful effect on a local population than words or propaganda.

In Bing West's "*Counterinsurgency Lessons*", the first lesson he lists is "1. Partner always.....If a U.S. unit is not combined with a local unit, it cannot succeed."⁶⁵ The combined action concept has been used and modified in counterinsurgencies since Vietnam. In 2004, the 1st Marine Division in Al Anbar Province, Iraq required all subordinate battalions to establish Combined Action Platoons with what was then the Iraqi National Guard (ING.) The program ended when the ING was disbanded in 2005; however, Military Transition Teams (MiTT) were then established that utilized the combined action concept. Currently in Afghanistan, the combined action concept is being utilized in the form of Embedded Training Teams (ETTs). Where small teams are embedded into Afghan units to train, mentor, and advise them. In execution, those ETTs are very similar to the CAPs of Vietnam. The ETTs share living space, meals, guard watch duties with their Afghan partners, and accompany them on patrols and operations. Since the partnered Afghan units are deployed throughout the Afghan rural areas, the ETTs are deployed with them and have personal interaction with the local leaders and

local populations. The current use of MiTTs and ETTs are examples of the CAP concept's relevance to current and future counterinsurgencies.

CONCLUSION

The Combined Action Program in Vietnam was a U.S. Marine initiative that proved to be an effective method on combating the insurgent Viet Cong at the local level. The overall U.S. strategy in Vietnam focused on large conventional formations to deny the enemy resources from North Vietnam. The Combined Action Program had a different approach, it used small combined units to deny the guerrilla insurgent access to local populations.

The Combined Action Program started as an idea to add depth to the security of a U.S. Marine airstrip, and soon demonstrated the potential to be an effective counterinsurgent weapon. The initial success of the program ignited a rapid expansion that coincided with the rapid American build up of forces in 1967 and 1968. The program grew faster than its ability to field well qualified CAP members.

A major factor of the success of the CAPs was the extensive use of local security forces. They Popular Forces were the majority of the CAP even though, the U.S. Marine squad provided the majority of the capability. The CAP was able to connect the improved security and improved quality of life to the local government officials and local security forces. Thus providing an alternative to the intimidation and propaganda of the Viet Cong.

The CAPs were able to disprove enemy propaganda through their continued presence, professional behavior, and compassionate actions. By living in the hamlets, the CAPs denied the Viet Cong free access to the hamlets. When a group of Viet Cong

visited a hamlet occupied by a CAP, they would not know where the CAP patrol was, or if the population would disclose their presence to the CAP.

The CAP benefited from the strengths of both components. The Popular Forces had local relationships, language skills, as well as local knowledge of the physical and human terrain. The Popular Forces also had the advantage of representing local Vietnamese government, instead of representing a foreign imperialist. The U.S. Marine component had all of the combat power and combat enablers associated with a U.S. Marine infantry battalion on the other end of their radio. They provided fire support, medical evacuation, reactionary forces, intelligence analysis, and civil military operations. The CAP Marines also provided the leadership and example of U.S. Marines. Through exposure and training over time the Popular Force components increased in discipline, proficiency, and professionalism.

The Combined Action concept is an effective method in combating guerrilla insurgents in other parts of the World and for future applications. It has been effectively modified and employed in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

¹ Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons; The US Marines' Other War* (New York: Praeger Publishers 1989)

² Ibid.

³ Al Hemingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1950), 15

⁴ Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons; The US Marines' Other War* (New York: Praeger Publishers 1989), 18

⁵ Ibid. 17

⁶ Ibid. 18

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Fleet Marine Force Reference Publication 12-15, *Small Wars Manual 1940* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office 1940), 18

¹⁰ Andrew Krepinevich jr. *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore; The John Hopkins University Press 1986), 172

¹¹ Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons; The US Marines' Other War* (New York: Praeger Publishers 1989), 21

¹² Andrew Krepinevich jr. *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore; The John Hopkins University Press 1986), 177

¹³ Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons; The US Marines' Other War* (New York: Praeger Publishers 1989), 22

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ William R. Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York: WW Norton & Company Inc 1968), 174

¹⁷ Ibid. 175

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons; The US Marines' Other War* (New York: Praeger Publishers 1989), 23 and Lewis W. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls 1970), 105

²¹ Robert A. Klyman, "The Combined Action Program; An Alternative Not Taken" (Honors Thesis, University of Michigan, 1986), 6, Capmarine.com/cap/thesis-klymam.htm

²² Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons; The US Marines' Other War* (New York: Praeger Publishers 1989), 23

²³ Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight; An inside view of the U.S. Marine Corps* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1984), 187

²⁴ Ibid. 188

²⁵ Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons; The US Marines' Other War* (New York: Praeger Publishers 1989), 24

²⁶ Ibid. 24-25

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Lewis W. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls 1970), 107

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons; The US Marines' Other War* (New York: Praeger Publishers 1989), 27

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ William R. Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York: WW Norton & Company Inc 1968), 179

³⁵ Stephen S. Evans, *US Marines and Irregular Warfare, 1898-2007* (Quantico; Marine Corps University 2008), 151

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ III MAF Force Order 3121.4B dated 22 June 1968

USMC Archives: Vietnam War Collection 1954-75
Box 7 folder 25 coll/3808

³⁸ Al Hemingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1950), 5

³⁹ Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons; The US Marines' Other War* (New York: Praeger Publishers 1989), 37

⁴⁰ Al Hemingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1950), 5

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons; The US Marines' Other War* (New York: Praeger Publishers 1989), 26

⁴³ III MAF Memorandum Dated 19 October 1967
USMC Archives: Vietnam War Collection 1954-75
Box 7 folder 25 coll/3808

⁴⁴ III MAF Force Order 3121.4B dated 22 June 1968
USMC Archives: Vietnam War Collection 1954-75
Box 7 folder 25 coll/3808, 3

⁴⁵ Al Hemingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1950), 18

⁴⁶ III MAF Force Order 3121.4B dated 22 June 1968
USMC Archives: Vietnam War Collection 1954-75
Box 7 folder 25 coll/3808, 3

⁴⁷ Al Hemingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1950), 5

⁴⁸ Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons; The US Marines' Other War* (New York: Praeger Publishers 1989), 60

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ William R. Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York: WW Norton & Company Inc 1968), 190

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² III MAF Force Order 3121.4B dated 22 June 1968
USMC Archives: Vietnam War Collection 1954-75

Box 7 folder 25 coll/3808, 5

⁵³ Robert A. Klyman, “The Combined Action Program; An Alternative Not Taken” (Honors Thesis, University of Michigan, 1986), 10, Capmarine.com/cap/thesis-klymam.htm

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ William R. Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York: WW Norton & Company Inc 1968), 190

⁵⁷ Lewis W. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls 1970), 106

⁵⁸ Stephen S. Evans, *US Marines and Irregular Warfare, 1898-2007* (Quantico; Marine Corps University 2008), 150

⁵⁹ Andrew Krepinevich jr. *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore; The John Hopkins University Press 1986), 174

⁶⁰ Stephen S. Evans, *US Marines and Irregular Warfare, 1898-2007* (Quantico; Marine Corps University 2008), 150

⁶¹ Robert A. Klyman, “The Combined Action Program; An Alternative Not Taken” (Honors Thesis, University of Michigan, 1986), 51, Capmarine.com/cap/thesis-klymam.htm

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Andrew Krepinevich jr. *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore; The John Hopkins University Press 1986), 176

⁶⁴ Stephen S. Evans, *US Marines and Irregular Warfare, 1898-2007* (Quantico; Marine Corps University 2008), 149

⁶⁵ Bing West, *The Strongest Tribe: War, Politics, and the Endgame in Iraq* (New York: Random House 2008), Appendix C

BIBLIOGRAPHY

III MAF Force Order 3121.4B dated 22 June 1968
USMC Archives: Vietnam War Collection 1954-75
Box 7 folder 25 coll/3808

III MAF Memorandum Dated 19 October 1967
USMC Archives: Vietnam War Collection 1954-75
Box 7 folder 25 coll/3808

Corson, William R. *The Betrayal*
New York: WW Norton & Company Inc 1968

Evans, Stephen S *US Marines and Irregular Warfare, 1898-2007*
Quantico; Marine Corps University 2008

Essay by Yates, Lawrence *A Feather in Their Cap? The Marines' Combined Action Program in Vietnam*

Fleet Marine Force Reference Publication (FMFP)12-15. *Small Wars Manual*
United States Government Printing Office Washington: 1940

Hemingway, Al. *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*
Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1950

Kilcullen, David J. *Counterinsurgency*
Oxford: Oxford Press 2010

Klyman, Robert A *The Combined Action Program; An Alternative Not Taken*
Honors Thesis 1986: University of Michigan
Capmarine.com/cap/thesis-klymam.htm

Krepinevich, Andrew, jr *The Army and Vietnam*
Baltimore; The John Hopkins University Press 1986

Krulak, Victor H *First to Fight; An inside view of the U.S. Marine Corps*
Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1984

Nagl, John A. *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam.*
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2002

Peterson E. Michael. *The Combined Action Platoons; The US Marines' Other War*
New York: Praeger Publishers 1989

The US Army & Marine Corps *Counterinsurgency Manual*

MCWP 3-33.5

Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2007

Turley, G.H. *The Easter Offensive: Vietnam 1972*

Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1985

Tse-tung, Mao. *Mao Tse-Tung on Guerrilla Warfare*

FMFRP 12-18 signed 1989

Translated by BG Samuel B. Griffith

Walt, Lewis W. *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam*

New York: Funk & Wagnalls 1970

West, Bing *The Village: Fifteen Walked in. Eight Walked Out*

New York: Simon & Schuster 1972

West, Bing *The Strongest Tribe: War, Politics, and the Endgame in Iraq*

New York: Random House 2008